

THE STORY OF OUR LIVES FROM YEAR TO YEAR

ALL THE YEAR ROUND

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"THE FLOWER OF DOOM;"

OR, THE CONSPIRATOR.

A SHORT SERIAL STORY.

By MISS BETHAM-EDWARDS,

Author of "Kitty," "Love and Mirage," etc., etc.

CHAPTER XI. WEDDED.

IT never occurred to Bernarda that because her marriage was to take place under extraordinary circumstances, and because she was no longer in the rosebud stage of existence, she should discard the beautiful and symbolic dress expected of brides. She was about to give herself in all her whiteness of soul to this man she adored, to celebrate an act solemn and fateful always, but doubly, trebly, in her own case. She trembled as she glanced towards the future. Into the depths of Edgeworth's soul she dared not look. But he loved her; he was going to become her husband. Mixed with the wild exultation his confession had brought her, a ray of hope therefore gilded her marriage-day. So she dressed herself in the most perfect and appropriate gown to be had, and marvellously did it heighten her mature, stately beauty. She felt half-inclined to lay aside the flower she had worn all these years; the pansy could no longer have the same significance, she said, since Edgeworth loved her. As far as his affection was concerned he had made reparation and healed the wounds made long years ago. Yet, partly from habit, and partly from a strange feeling that now possessed her, a conviction, presentiment—she knew not by what name to call it—that her favourite flower was still connected in some occult way with her destiny, she decided to wear it still. There were magnificent roses of her bridegroom's sending, and a myrtle wreath for her dark hair, but the

discarded heartsease was finally fastened to the corsage of her white satin dress. A striking ornament it made there, looking more like a jewelled flower than a blossom destined to fade in an hour. It was one of those large, gorgeous heartseases of deepest, ruddiest crimson, with deeper markings still of purply black, and the flower fastened, her toilette was done. What a bride to dazzle the eyes of an expectant bridegroom! Bernarda now dismissed Marion and the lame girl, and awaited Edgeworth's coming alone. She clasped her hands and breathed a long silent prayer, that shaped itself into a vow. Come what might, dark days of shame, misery, and separation—let even the anguish of estrangement do its worst—she would never surrender conscience to her husband's guidance. If she could not rescue him, at least he should never drag her down to perdition.

But could she not now save him? He loved her. What influence as a wife might she not exercise? In spite of himself he might be rescued from the last infamy. On a sudden she heard his voice, and gathering up gloves and roses met him in the outer room.

In that first moment of charmed surprise Edgeworth did not so much as open his lips, but never eloquence expressed so much. He was dumbfounded, dazzled by her superb appearance, and she saw it. Such silence was sweetest flattery.

"Was ever any mortal satisfied?" he said at last. "You have dressed for me, and I would not for worlds have it otherwise; yet I am dissatisfied, because I cannot parade you before all the world."

His face beamed as he added in an undertone:

"Ah, if those dreams come true you will never lend ear to—if might brings

about right—there would be grand parts for such women as you to play, my queen.”

Bernarda smiled at him—for the life of her, unable to resist a sarcasm.

“And for men like you! But I would rather be your wife than your subject, my poor, wrong-headed Edgeworth!”

“And I would rather be your husband than my country’s king,” he added.

Then came the singing girl to say that Bernarda’s witnesses—a favourite pupil and her father—had arrived, and the tête-à-tête was interrupted for an hour or two—till all was over, and Edgeworth Edgeworth and Bernarda Burke had been declared husband and wife in due form.

“A week—a week! Why must we go back at the end of a week?” Bernarda said playfully, after two or three days’ honeymoon in a quiet spot by the sea. “Is it worth while to be married for so short a holiday as that?”

Edgeworth retorted in the same sportive vein, although she saw that such questions disturbed him:

“Must, then, a premium be put upon marriage? I always thought the contrary, and that when folks were in love they would go to the galleys for the sake of being united to each other.”

He did not, however, hold out any prospect of extending the allotted seven days, and Bernarda forbore to ask questions. She saw that he had made up his mind to live desperately, feverishly, in the present moment, not daring to look a single hour beyond.

CHAPTER XII. HEART TO HEART LAID BARE.

FIVE days glided by uneventfully, but on the sixth the crisis came. Bernarda had retired to rest early, leaving Edgeworth busy with letter-writing.

“You need rest, I am sure,” he said, as, coming behind him, she dropped a kiss on his shaggy poll, and murmured a sleepy good-night. “Sleep away, then, and to-morrow one more gallop across the downs.”

There was nothing unusual about his look or manner as he said this, and nothing had occurred during the day to give her any fresh uneasiness. They were walking on the edge of a precipice—she knew that well enough, but familiarity with the position made it seem less terrible.

What was her astonishment, then, on waking long after midnight, to find that

Edgeworth had never gone to bed at all! It was just this sort of catastrophe she most dreaded. Some day or other, without warning, her husband would mysteriously disappear, and the end would be bitterest sorrow and ignominy, her portion to bear alone.

Throwing on a warmly wadded crimson dressing-gown, she stole noiselessly towards the inner room where she had left him a few hours before, and gently opening the folding-doors looked in. The fire was out, and the gas turned down; but a wax-light low in the socket sufficiently lighted up Edgeworth’s dejected figure. He was not writing, only thinking, and the nature of his thoughts betokened itself in his attitude. He looked like a man whose moral and physical forces are spent, and who for a moment yields himself unresistingly to the grip of evil fortune. No remorse did the shrinking Bernarda read in his pale, rigid features, only misery and despair.

She had left a night-light burning in their bedchamber, but the feeble flame did not disturb him, nor her entrance either. As she now stood by the partially-opened folding-door she hesitated whether to speak to him or not. For the first time she saw an expression in his countenance that inspired a feeling worse than fear. It was a face she did not know! To the wife, adoring and adored, the husband’s look had become on a sudden as that of a stranger.

Had he noticed her intrusion? Was her presence unbearable to him? As she stood thus debating within herself, she caught sight of his travelling valise and other preparations for a journey. In a moment light flashed upon her mind, and she understood full well what these secret preparations for departure must mean. He had all along pledged himself to take part in some dreadful deed, and was now finally called upon to fulfil his word, or perhaps some horrid lot had fallen to his name, and he was singled out by chance of all his confederates to be the perpetrator of some unparalleled crime.

The sense of horror and the presentiment of approaching separation—separation of a nature too awful to dwell upon, was more than she could bear. Now, if ever heart must be laid bare to heart, now, or perhaps never so long as they both should live, they must get to the very depths of each other’s nature. Friendship, with its pleasant converse; love, with its sweet inevitable familiarity, had brought them

very near together. As yet soul had not spoken to soul. Each had kept back one self from the other. There was a side of her character he did not know, whilst, in a certain sense, even the adoring husband was a stranger to her.

"You would then leave me without a word. Is your wife such a coward that she could not bear a last farewell?"

She put her arms about him now, and added in accents more pathetic and penetrating still:

"For a farewell is in store for us, I am sure. Oh, speak to me! Your face is turned to stone, yet it is the same Edgeworth—my Edgeworth! and I am innocent of blame."

He smiled, and he accepted the caress, but what a smile! Her heart sank within her, yet she remained mistress of herself.

"You innocent!" he murmured in a low, crushed voice. "What are you dreaming of? Have you not made me fond of you?"

"I have never forfeited my word," Bernarda answered, grown suddenly as white and rigid as himself. "My heart is yours—to break if you will."

"You have hoped all the same to win me and retain me. You poor, good woman," he said; "why did I marry you?"

Bernarda was kneeling now beside him. She fancied he was weeping, and in the feeling of helpless, almost childish despair that came over her, only one desperate hope seemed there to clutch at.

"There is the sea," she whispered. As she spoke she held up one hand and motioned to him to hearken to the waves beating against the shore. "Beyond it somewhere in the wide world we might surely find a home," she went on, whispering eagerly in his ear. "There is no device I would not stoop to to free you from these toils—disguise, anything. You are rich, and money can do so much! A poor fisher's boat would take us across this narrow strait. You have friends in happy France, and so have I. Let us go. Let us live harmlessly there for each other."

She clung to his knees, the proud woman for once pleading for herself. It was her love, her husband, above all, she fain would save now.

She had not realised before what a necessity his presence and his affection had become in her.

Only to have him always! That low agonised prayer in whispers told Edgeworth all.

There was not a vestige of hopefulness in the voice with which he answered her. He spoke calmly, but it was evident that his collectedness was costing him a tremendous effort.

"I cannot hide myself if I would. No loophole of escape anywhere. And now I cling to life and liberty because I love you. Good Heaven, how happy we might have been! And I am no villain born; I have a heart for natural affection and innocent pleasures like other men. A fireside with you, a child to call after its mother——"

He paused for a moment as if to dwell on the indescribably sweet, unreachable picture. Then, wholly unmanned, he went on rapidly as if he must make an end:

"These things make a man babyish—satanic—look you. They put a demon or a poltroon into him. I was about to steal away because I dared not bid you farewell, and because—because—— But no matter. Listen, wife. You will know nothing of my doings for some days—perhaps weeks—to come. Go back to your own home till I give you a sign. For, indeed, and indeed, you must let me go," he added gently as he sought to put her away from him. "Were I to turn renegade now, we should hardly be any more sure of happiness. Too late, love—love, too late!"

The word "renegade" had fallen from his lips, not her own. Bernarda shook off the lethargy of despair, and sprang to her feet. He had thrown down the gauntlet. It was for her to accept the challenge.

"Happiness!" she cried. "Do we then so little understand each other still? Is it for the sake of mere happiness I would have you break your word? Oh, Edgeworth, pardon, if for one wild moment I counselled flight! The thought of separation was more than I could bear. But now, when you are leaving me, and your looks, words, and some dim foreboding within tells me it is for ever, I cannot think of ourselves, or happiness at all. I think of your honour, the crimes with which you are about to pollute your soul, the stain, never to be washed out, with which you are about to sully your name. Do I not bear it—that name? May there not be—— But I will not think of the future, only of yourself. Is there not something that should stand before love—before country? You cannot disarm conscience. And you are one of the leaders. Your defection on moral grounds would be as an inner voice speaking to many."

She stood confronting him in her august appeal, no tears in the beautiful eyes now, no fond tremblings of the sweet voice, no feminine beatings of the heart. It was not the woman appealing to the beloved, not the wife trying blandishments with her husband, but one human heart laid bare to another—soul speaking to soul.

He answered in a cowed, almost sullen voice :

"You speak as if you knew all."

These little words filled Bernarda's mind with fresh and more terrible apprehensions. No amount of details or explanation could have made her realise so fully the awfulness of his position. And it was the awfulness, from a moral point of view, she only thought of now. On the consequences of his deeds to herself and to him she did not dwell, only on their intrinsic blackness, and the misery they would entail on others.

"Oh!" she said, throwing all her passion and nearly spent forces into one agonised supplication more, reckless now of nothing but the chance of rescuing him from the last infamy, "we are at the close of the year—the year that has brought us together. At least let this one end without crime."

He laughed bitterly.

"A week or two of delay. What good could come of it? But harm might—to ourselves, I mean."

"Do not let us think of ourselves," Bernarda said, clinging to him, no longer a monitor—a conscience—but his love, his own fond wife for one moment more. "Think of the effect your hesitation might have on others. You draw back appalled—you who are ready to lay down your life for this cause! Would not others stop short in horror? And you would have averted crime and misery; your memory would be perpetually sweet to me, if I survive you; and if not, you would at least feel that you had not broken my heart, for," she said, still clinging to him in an abandonment of love and despair, "I feel as if, however these things turn out, we are not to be together long. It is this that makes it horrible to me to lose you now, bent on what fearful deed I dare not ask, leaving me already widowed. Wickedness drives out love. I should learn, perhaps, to loathe you against my will. The Edgeworth I loved would seem dead. The Edgeworth stained with crime, how could I let him so much as come near me? Is it not something then to keep you if only for a little week—seven whole days? You love me—you consent!"

"To what?" said Edgeworth hoarsely, and no longer master of himself. "Yet," he murmured, as he held her in his arms, speaking not to her but to himself, "I am too powerful, too much of a force, too rich! None of them would dare to raise a finger against me or mine. And a man has surely a right to two weeks' truce after his wedding! I was against this time, too, from the first. My demur now will not occasion surprise. Why disturb the world's peace at Christmas——"

Bernarda listened in a tumult of wild hopes, yet with reined-in abhorrence. Black and frightful the chasm that Edgeworth's last words had opened to her.

"We are rich," he went on, gloating over the thought with almost savage exultation. "How good to have money, my Erna! Money may purchase this reprieve! But go back to bed, wife, and try to sleep. There are things not to be put into a letter, parleyings not to be entrusted to the post—you understand? I must therefore make this journey all the same."

"But not alone!" replied Bernarda.

IN THE FLORIDA PINE WOODS.

IN TWO PARTS. PART II.

ON the next day the "melancholy event," which was to be its great feature, and mark it with black letters in the memory of the Bartow youngsters, had a depressing effect on the Blount household. I found the house as quiet as a tomb when I crept down after breakfast in bed, feeling very giddy, and determined to visit the doctor at his drug-store before going to church.

In the middle of the corridor sat Mr. Blount, his head bare, and his back bent over a big book open upon his knees. The book was a Bible.

"It may be me next, mister," said he, looking up wearily, with something very like a tear in his eye.

I asked where the rest of the world could be found, as no one else was in sight.

"The gals is figgering themselves in their best black, I reckon," replied Mr. Blount; "and all the boarders is gone to church."

Glancing at the Bible, I observed that it was open at Revelations.

"Why Revelations?" I asked, perhaps more inquisitive than was decorous.

"I guess it don't sinnify where we read. It's the one Book as is good from beginning to end," said he.

Leaving Mr. Blount, I then went out in

the direction of the drug-store, hearing the first note of the bell as it began to toll. The city was alive with men, women, and children. They straggled over the green-sward in scores, thickening towards the church in the west. Already two or three of the stores had their shutters up.

Fortunately, I was in time for the doctor. He had a patient in the person of a well-stained working-man, who had come in from the country for something "to fight the chills." The man had a presentiment of sickness, and the doctor, good soul, did not lecture him on the folly of such fancies, but put before him a row of bottles, in inscribed paper, and bade him select any two.

"They're a dollar each, pick where you like. They'll do your business for you, and cheaply, too."

Accordingly, without a murmur, though a little shamefaced and hurriedly, the man put one bottle in his right-hand pocket and the other in the pocket to the left; and, jangling the dollars on the counter, he marched out, and into the forest again.

I hoped my case would not require such costly treatment. I was in want of stimulants—not such stuff as the saloon supplied, but veritable liquor to encourage the blood and brace the nerves. The doctor listened, stroked his beard, looked profoundly serious, and thought a while in silence. Then he said a dollar tonic was the very thing for me. From what he could make of my case, I might hope for the best after the tonic.

I hastily replied that I hoped for the best already, and that I merely wanted a draught of something on the spot.

"That will not do," said the doctor with infinite despondency of tone. "It is no small matter to slight an attack of fever. You are weakened, anyone may see, and quite unfit to resist the next disease or ailment which may come upon you. Now, this," laying his left forefinger fondly on a carefully-wrapped bottle, "is just the sort of stuff to make you, as it were, impregnable."

This was high and seductive praise for the tonic, but I was none the more inclined to be subservient to the craft of the drug-master.

"In plain words, I want a clean drink," said I. "The tonic I will have later on, if I want it."

Not until now did the doctor inform me that he had no qualification entitling him to sell alcoholic liquor, or such beverages

as I asked for. True, he had many delicious and stimulating fluids in the brightly-coloured bottles on his shelves, but he did not retail them. They were used by him for the compounding of his medicines. It was a pity, but he was prohibited—strictly.

Greatly depressed in spirits, I moved towards the open door, determined to go directly to the church, and make one in the funeral procession.

But no. Though the doctor could do nothing for me, he would like me to stay with him for a moment or two. Why should he not prescribe for me? Or, better still, maybe I had a prescription in my pocket-book. If so, the thing was done, for, of course, I could not be supposed able to read the mysterious writing of the profession.

Unfortunately, however, I had no such reminiscence of past sickness about me; nor would I be prescribed for. But my own eyes just then caught the name on a bottle of dark liquid before me, "cherry brandy," and all my yearning returned.

Again I desperately implored him to sell me a pint, or as small a quantity as he would, of the inspiriting liquor; and in my desperation I forgot myself, and my duty personal and relative, for I hurried to the door, looked this way and that, and, returning, informed the doctor that no one was near to see what he might do. Happily, he was a man well worn in life, and versed in the infirmities of our nature, for he only smiled and said, "No, that won't do," in a melancholy tone.

Once more I was prompted to evil. It came upon me suddenly, with the tolling of the bell, strange to say. What if I wrote a prescription?

Would the doctor regard it; or would he take and tear it into a score of pieces, righteously indignant?

I put it to him, bit by bit—and then bodily—with bated breath.

Silence again for thirty seconds. Then, still without speaking, the doctor passed me a prescription form, and told me to sign my name opposite the M.D. at the bottom.

"I am bound to tell you, doctor, that I have no medical degree," I was beginning to say, but the doctor only waved his hand impatiently, muttering a mild "Hush!"

I no longer hesitated, but, with a dash, wrote out the following prescription: "Two ounces cherry brandy, two ounces water," and signed it. Then, with a grave

face, as though the doctor and I were in consultation over some distinguished patient with a complication of maladies, I returned the paper to him.

The cautious man looked long at it, and thoughtfully, as though it were elaborate, involving much and careful labour, and it seemed to me that I heard the deliberate church-bell toll a dozen times before he made any movement in assent to my mute proposition or repudiation of it.

At the end of some time, without a word, the doctor put forth his hand, and measured into a glass the two ounces of cherry brandy which were the main item on my paper, and then carefully measured the same quantity of water into another glass; setting both glasses before me with a laconic request for twenty-five cents.

I swallowed the brandy at a gulp, took not the least notice of the water—Florida water is something of a medicine at all times—gave my doctor a quarter-dollar, and, with courteous good-morning, left him to his thoughts. Half an hour afterwards I saw him in the church with the rest of Bartow, but his face told little of his feelings. It is quite possible the kind-hearted man did not consider the prescription worth registration.

Much fortified and enlivened by the tonic of my own prescribing, I now walked towards the church. It was as blithesome a morning as can be imagined. The sky was blue and cloudless, but the heat was most judiciously tempered by a breeze which had come a hundred and fifty miles from the Atlantic, through pine-forests, gathering sweet and exhilarating perfume by the way. The fresh green tops of the pines in the west were swaying lazily. A party of rather lean kine, with bells round their necks, strolled quietly through the city, with their heads up, as though they wondered what the green and white buildings here and there might signify. The air was pervaded by the sound of millions of grasshoppers chirruping their contentment with life. Higher up, in the boughs of a wild lemon-tree, dying of civilisation, a brace of mocking-birds were interchanging shrill discourtesies, and manœuvring gymnastically from twig to twig in their efforts to peck the life out of each other. Higher still, seemingly bathed in the blue of the heavens, a party of buzzards appeared to be prospecting the city of Bartow from a safe distance—as if anyone would ill-treat a buzzard—until, suddenly, with a lightning swoop, one of them deserted the empyrean,

and settled—a lunched ungainly heap—on the head of a cypress.

But by this, I was in the midst of live Bartow, stiff in unfamiliar clothes, and almost hysterical with expectation, if eyes and mouths open so strangely as those of the women and children about the church were capable of right interpretation. There must have been a couple of hundred of them standing looking fixedly at one quarter of the forest; the children in a sad state of suffering bewilderment, clutching their mothers, and glancing alternately at their dark garments, the faces of their parents, and the fascinating forest.

As for the men of the community, they stood apart. The citizens and farmers—all whites—were a tall, strong-featured band of men, in black from head to toe, save for a knot of white ribbon worn in the button-hole of the coat like a distinction. They did not gape like the women, but talked soberly and composedly.

A tremor of excitement among the women made me follow the direction of their eyes. A procession was seen in the distance coming through the maze of pine-trunks. The bell began to toll more briskly, and an orderly rush for seats inside was made by certain boys and girls.

I followed the crowd into the church, and succeeded in getting a seat in a pew by the side of an old man, who was solacing himself in that distressing moment with a pinch of snuff, as well as his shaking fingers would permit.

The good people of Bartow, thus clothed in their best, were a curious gathering. The women and elder girls wore dresses and bonnets or hats whose fashion had long died away in other parts of the world. Yet, for all the solemnity of the hour and their general oddity, they could not help very palpably comparing appearances with each other, and doing their utmost to second the effect of their sartorial bravery. It was not one day in a hundred that they had such a chance of parading their "best black."

But the men and boys were still more grotesque in their apparel. Save such as had come originally from large cities, where friction soon rubs off eccentricity, they were all marked characters, as seen with their faces in deep shadow, and their bodies covered with garments that bore "home-made" written in their every crease. Doubtless their black cloth coats concealed arms bunched with muscles, and bodies strong as oak-trees; but they

did it so ungraciously, with such excessive allowance for the still further increase in size of the same arms and bodies, that one might be excused for one moment believing that it was the man who was defective, and not his clothes.

And the smaller the man or boy, the more deformed did he seem. One hapless little boy, for instance, came into church with trousers which must have been someone else's, or made large with a view to his distant manhood; while the coat into which he had evidently been compressed, fitted like a skin on his back, could not meet by inches in front, and stayed, as to its sleeves, a long way from his wrists. This boy was so much more of a figure than common, that other boys in the building found it more amusing to laugh at him than follow the service, heedless that they, each and all, were only slightly less ridiculous than he.

But all thoughts of dress and demeanour seemed for the moment forgotten or absorbed in the bustle at the church porch. A man with a large white ribbon in his buttonhole came inside and made certain arrangements in the east of the church by the rails round the dais, and then withdrew, to bring two other citizens for their opinion on what he had done. This under the eyes of the congregation, the younger part of which was already hectic with excitement, and now and again standing on tiptoe to get a better view of what was going forward.

Then, a gentleman, in a coat betokening his ordination, entered, and, with uplifted hand, asked for perfect silence. I did not think his request would be granted; but for the space of about half a minute you might have heard a pin drop. It was a dreadful lull inside, contrasted with the uncertain, heavy advancing tread of feet outside. Even the sob of distress from the lady in black crape, leaning ponderously on the arm of a younger lady, also in black crape, who followed the bearers up the narrow side-aisle, came as a relief, though when the poor woman's cries became loud enough to echo throughout the building, one longed again for the stillness.

Prominent among those who preceded the coffin was a very tall old man, with a small bald head. He was in orders, and evidently a friend of the dead man. Now and again he would cover his face with his hands, or look about him with a sorrowing expression. This clergyman had undertaken the funeral sermon and service.

When the coffin was deposited where it could be seen by most of the congregation, and the sobbing of the widow had somewhat abated, the service began. As for the significance which this old clergyman put into his words, it was marvellous. Not an accent of his voice but told how he deplored the loss yonder poor woman, himself, and the community had suffered; and he did not need the extra impulse he seemed to receive whenever his eyes—they were mild, dark eyes—rested on the velvet-palled, wreath-becrowned coffin a few feet from him. Thrice he broke down in his sermon, and cried aloud, with his big gaunt hands before his face, like a boy. But for each of these lapses of self-control he tried, as it were, to atone by new and increased vigour of speech. Indeed, at length, when he had sent electric bolt after electric bolt among us, and had made the little building reverberate chaotically, he himself began to feel the fatigue of such exertion, and brought the sermon to a close.

He sat down; then, as if he had neglected something, he rose again, and in clear, tranquillising tones said that a wish having been expressed that the coffin should be opened for friends to see the deceased once more, this would be done during the singing of a hymn. And immediately, as if he had not spent his strength freely enough already, the old man led off the hymn with a full voice for the encouragement of others.

The hymn ended, and the carpenter having gone back to his seat, there was a general shuffling from the pews of old men and women, young men and women, boys and girls, who formed a regular line, and proceeded in order towards the coffin. Poor Major P—— lay at rest, heedless of the scene. But not so his widow, who, almost alone in the church, kept her seat, while these others, compared to her, mere strangers to him, looked at him again. No wonder she lost self-control afresh.

And so one by one the congregation paused alongside the coffin, satisfied their affection or curiosity, and returned to their pews, either calm and saddened, pale and convulsed, or smiling with a sense of triumph at having borne the sight so well.

From my pew I observed the four girls from Blount House, each with a handkerchief to her eyes, awaiting their turn, and subsequently reseated themselves with pale faces, yet very carefully, so that no part of their best black might be jeopardised. I

am a little mistaken if the young things did not peep a good deal from behind their handkerchiefs to see what the rest of Bartow thought of them.

Another hymn was sung during the final closing of the coffin, and then the old minister gave us a benediction which, for eloquence and fervour, I have never heard equalled. After this there was a general trooping forth and gathering on the sward outside, where a dozen buggies and carts full of mourners were already waiting. A procession was rapidly formed, the coffin put on one of the light carts used for the conveying of produce to market, followed immediately by a buggy containing the two ladies in crape, and all proceeded slowly by the thick sandy track towards the cemetery.

The cemetery was a piece of virgin land enclosed from the forest, with all its trees thickly upon it. The number of graves could have been counted in a minute or two. They were mostly at the foot of a tree, as though the trunk of the pine, aspiring upwards, were designed for a head-stone. And all about between the trees, and over the mounds, wild vines and morning-glories flung their trellis-work, knitting them lightly together. A rude fencing of stakes driven in X-wise served to keep roaming bears, deer, panthers, or wild hogs out of the consecrated plot; but there was nothing to prevent wild turkey roosting in the trees, or the green, blue, scarlet, and yellow birds of the semi-tropical South from flashing their rainbow-colours over the still heaps of sand. Here poor Major P—— was laid in his bed, amid the hearty sobbing of a hundred friends.

An hour later the four girls of Blount House were gliding merrily on their roller-skates up and down the pine-boarded corridor of their father's house, and old Blount himself, having put the Bible high out of reach on a top shelf, was earnest in exposition of the peccadilloes of certain fellow-citizens.

That evening, after supper, I was strolling in the western woods, when I came upon two Bartow boys, standing in the scrub, discussing the funeral of the morning. The elder of the boys was, to the eye, about eleven years old, the other four or five years younger. The former was smoking a long, fat, richly-scented cigar with much appreciation.

"Wasn't he white?" said the younger one, awestruck by his memory.

"Yes, of course," was the other's reply;

"they all are. But say, I wouldn't like it if I was him. I'd like to jump up and frighten 'em all—wouldn't I?" This was followed by clouds of cigar-smoke.

"Why did you go up and look at him if you wouldn't like it in his place?" I asked, stepping forward towards the cigar-smoker.

The boy stared with delicious effrontery, then took his cigar from his mouth, smiled knowingly, and guessed it was different.

"Why did you go up?" I persisted.

"Oh, I dunno, sir," said he. Then, turning to the other little boy, he put the question to him on my behalf, with a wink on his own: "Why did you, Neddy?"

Neddy was rather frightened under the questioning, nor at all reassured by the wink. But he managed to say that he had only done what the others did, "and I wish I hadn't—I do," he said. "He was so frightful white!"

After this, it was easy to get the cigar-smoker to confess that he was no better than Neddy. He had seen Major P. when alive, and spoken to him, but he had not known him "to love him, you know"; he hadn't been one with tears in his eyes—not he; it would take a deal to knock him over, he reckoned.

The occasion was one to be improved, if I had been up to the effort, and fit to play mentor. As it was, I merely told him that he was a pretty fellow to be smoking cigars, and that I hoped the taste would knock him over, if nothing else could.

"How old do you imagine I am, sir?" asked the boy, with an assumption of dignity.

"Something under ten," I replied, setting him aflame with indignation.

"I'm fourteen and four months," said he, then laughed hysterically to himself as he repeated the word "ten." However, it was something in his favour that he could first let his cigar out and then drop it.

"And why does your father let you smoke such weeds?" I continued.

"Weeds, sir!" cried he, rising some inches. "I don't smoke any but ten-cent cigars, and they're father's own, which he smokes. Try one, sir."

And to my wonder he pressed the thing upon me, and would have lit it from his own fusee-box.

After this, we could not but be friends. I asked him his name, and learnt that he was the eldest son of Mr. William Smith, who kept store in a side-street. And he, on his side, enquired my name and usual place of residence, whistling with admira-

tion when I told him I was English and had lately crossed the Atlantic.

"Those two little islands in the map, Neddy, you know—they're England," he explained to Neddy.

Finally, he whispered that his father was going to have a dance next evening, and that he was just then stepping up to ask Betty Foster to come to it—would I go with him? It wasn't far, and Betty would be sure to give me some oranges.

Of course I was willing to see Betty, and told him so, making him—the rude, outspoken, cigar-smoking backwoods boy—blush to his ears, and peer at me dubiously. But he seemed, on consideration, to reject me as a rival; for he immediately rejoined that I might easily see her if I would come, and Neddy should run on to tell her to wash her face (oh, Betty!), or would I come to the hop to-morrow—he could and would invite me on the spot! Then I might dance with Betty. He laughed mischievously, and put his hand to his mouth, as he said this about dancing.

"Perhaps she can't dance—is that it?" I asked.

"She! She not dance! You bet. It's you," he added, more mildly. "She's so precious little, and you—you're so tall—like a pine, ain't he, Neddy?"

As for Neddy, poor lad, he was completely extinguished by all this high talk. Master Smith's impudence terrified him.

But the boy's impudence had nothing malicious about it: his wits wanted "fixing" aright—that was all. Had there been a grammar-school in Bartow, with a tough birch to it, he would have been birched into politeness, and metamorphosed advantageously in some five or six months. This was shown, I thought, by his renewed invitation to the dance, pressed almost affectionately with a "Do come, sir!"

I thanked him, and said with his leave—which he granted proudly—I would make a memorandum of the engagement; if Betty was to be there to-morrow, I would postpone seeing her until then.

"And what is Betty Foster to you, Tom?" I asked most unchivalrously.

It was a sight thereupon to see Master Smith swell like a turkey, and try to stand on his toes, as he answered unhesitatingly, in a touch-me-who-dare tone of universal challenge:

"She's my girl, sir!"

I could not help laughing at him again, in spite of the disquietude it caused him;

but, as I told him, considering his relationship with Betty, it was a little hard on her that he had been content to waste time with Neddy and cigars first of all, and then linger talking with me, instead of flying to her. And then I left him, with a perplexed look on his face, and actually blushing for the second time within fifteen minutes.

As for Betty—alas! I had to leave Bartow next day, and so missed my chance of meeting her at the "hop."

CAN I FORGIVE?

CAN I forgive? Nay, sure I do not know.

Dear love, give me your hand, sit by the fire.

What have they done to us? how fell the blow?

Nay, dear one, do not speak. See, leaping higher,

The tinted flames spring up to show your face;

I watch you seated in the well-known place.

A little anguish, trouble, fame aspersed;

The outer world looked coldly for a while;

The storm-cloud lowered, yet it did not burst,

It only hid the summer's glorious smile.

It only threatened, shed one tiny tear;

It did not touch your faith in me, my dear!

Maybe, dear heart, sweetheart, the fervent trust

We had in humankind is not so strong;

Yet did we not expect too much? Unjust

'Twould be to blame the maker of the song,

If some voice unattuned took up the lay,

And with harsh notes swept all the air away.

What have they done then, sweet? The dear old

home,

All girt with green, and cradled in the hills,

Is ours no more; no longer may we roam

When eventide with all its grandeur fills

The hollows in the distance—may no more

Wander at night along the river shore!

Yet close your tender eyes, lean your dear head

Upon my shoulder. All comes back in haste.

I scent your flowers—see the glowing red

That round your window autumn's hand hath

traced;

I see the river run its course of gold,

The hills arise to greet us as of old.

They cannot take these pictures from us e'er;

They may not enter here our hearth beside;

They cannot spoil Dame Nature calm and fair;

They may not mar our love, or break our pride.

Ah, dearest, love me still, and while we live

We have no foe—there's nothing to forgive.

WHICH OF THEM?

A STORY IN TEN CHAPTERS. CHAPTER VII.

THE next morning the first visitor to the darkened house was Brixton. Bob, the page, opened the door to him.

"All over, then?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," stolidly answered the boy.

"Can I see Mrs. White?"

Mrs. White soon appeared, attired, as to her body, in extemporised mourning, attired, as to her mind, in that blended sadness and congratulation which is considered most congenial to the feelings of an heir enriched by death. She had all along been one of Brixton's warmest

supporters, and words which Mr. Marston had dropped in his last half-delirious weakness had satisfied her that Brixton was the chosen heir, even if—as she said—she could not believe her own eyes and ears that she had seen and heard him married to Lucy the night before.

"So it is over, Mrs. White?"

"Yes, sir. Your poor uncle never rallied after you left; in fact, he was really dead when you saw him last."

"When I saw him last?"

"Yes, sir; you may remember I gave it as my opinion at the time. You thought it was a faint, no doubt, but he never breathed again. It was a blessed thing as he had his wish first, and saw all settled between you and Miss Lucy."

"Can I see her?"

"Who has a better right, sir? I'll send her word you're here; but I don't know if she's up yet, for indeed she is worn out, poor lady, with all that she has gone through."

A message was dispatched to Mrs. Marston, but Mrs. White looked more disappointed than Brixton did when the reply came back than Mrs. Marston was very tired and unwell, and might not leave her room that day.

"Never mind, sir, it's nothing serious, I assure you; she'll be quite well to-morrow when she has got over the fatigue; you've no occasion to be anxious. But it was a sad wedding, wasn't it, sir? And a strange one; but it had your poor dear uncle's dying blessing on it, and no doubt you'll be blessed."

"I hope so, I'm sure," responded Brixton solemnly, but much puzzled.

"Of course, it's too soon to talk about arrangements," continued Mrs. White, "and would not be becoming. But if there were anything that you would wish done at once in the house, or about the attendance on Mrs. Marston, you may depend on my carrying out your wishes, sir, as it were on my own authority."

"Oh, thank you; nothing occurs to me at present. You know best about things as they are."

"I ought to know the ways of this house, surely, sir, having lived here in one or other capacity for five-and-twenty years before Miss Lucy—I beg your pardon, sir, Mrs. Marston—was born, or came here. Mrs. Marston, to be sure, may wish to do her own housekeeping; but a young lady like her will find it a great tie, and, at any rate, I hope, sir, that an old friend—if I

may use the expression—will have the preference over a stranger."

"These are matters that require consideration, Mrs. White," replied Brixton with dignity; "all that I can say for the present is that I fully appreciate your faithful service to my uncle, and for my part could wish for nothing better than its continuance to myself. In the meantime, I am still, of course, somewhat uncertain of my own position, and my mind is chiefly occupied with grief for him."

Brixton could not produce tears to order, but he could look as solemn as an undertaker's horse, and feel as keenly; and Mrs. White's soft heart was reminded of its duty. Genuine tears, though not from a very deep fountain, bedewed her black-bordered handkerchief, and due tribute of eulogistic words was paid to the memory of the departed. Finally, Brixton left word for Lucy that he would call again to-morrow morning, when he hoped to find her better.

He barely escaped being run over by Kensington's cab, which drew up at the door at an hour when its inmate was seldom seen abroad, unless there was "something up." Out he jumped now with an air of subdued eagerness which there was no one to appreciate, rang the bell softly but imperatively, and asked without hesitation for Mrs. Marston. He received the same answer as Brixton had done, but was much more discontented with it, and sent back to ask if Mrs. Marston would be able to see him in the evening. Mrs. Marston feared that she would not be well enough, and he had to content himself with promising to call again in the morning.

Unwelcome message after message thus broke in on the solitude of Lucy's darkened room; but as the hours wore past, none brought the announcement for which her ears were ready and her heart longing. She had made sure that Yorkshire would have been with her as soon almost as the morning; her headache and weariness would quickly have been forgotten in his arms; her few natural tears would have been wept out on his breast, and then they would have been free to be happy. She smiled when Brixton came, thinking how formidable he had been yesterday, how harmless he was to-day; she frowned at Kensington's persistency, and wondered that Yorkshire had let himself be outstripped. But wonder turned into dismay, and dismay into vague apprehension, and

that again took shape in a thousand torturing fancies, as the slow day wheeled round her, lying alone, without companions except servants, without occupation except maddening thought. Why did he not come? Why did he not send? Why did he not write? Could he be ill? Then he must be unconscious, or he would have sent her word. He must have met with an accident, and be lying senseless in some hospital. Or perhaps, worse than all, he had been disgusted at her unmaidenly conduct in summoning him last night; and though he had kept his word loyally, he was cold towards her, and did not care to meet her again.

"Men never love women who are easily won," she thought. "I have thrown myself at him—I actually asked him to marry me; and now, of course, he does not love me any more. And oh, how shall I look at him when he does come?"

Thus she tormented herself all day, but her pride would not allow her to drop a word which could let Mrs. White know that her persistent headache was due to fretting for Yorkshire; the good lady herself was satisfied that she had been married to Brixton; and though the house was by this time buzzing with assertions, contradictions, and disputes as to the identity of the bridegroom, the maid who waited on Lucy did not venture to say an unnecessary word to aggravate the pain of her throbbing head, or bring on one of the fits of hysterical sobbing into which she from time to time broke down at the end of that terrible day.

In the evening came a note from Mr. Picton, expressing sympathy, deeply regretting that he had been absent in the country when summoned the previous evening, and announcing his intention of opening Mr. Marston's will the following morning at eleven o'clock, and reading it in the presence of his nephews and herself, if she chose to be present. By this time Lucy was so worn out that she was ready to accept any consolation. Mr. Picton's taking it for granted that all three Alans would assemble next morning, seemed to her an assurance that they would do so; she slipped from under the burden of misery that she was too weak to carry any longer, drank some tea, and slept the long, heavy sleep of exhaustion. Next morning she awoke full of hope, and satisfied that she should see her husband, and all would be well.

At ten minutes to eleven, Brixton

walked up the steps, and rang the bell. He was the first arrival, and he surveyed everything around him with a curious air of uncertain proprietorship. He practised glancing with the eye of a master, and wished it were possible to know how he was doing it. There was a mirror, however, over the dining-room mantelpiece; so he glanced at that with the eye of a master; but he was not quite sure that he should have recognised the expression, if he had not known. He might easily have mistaken it for a furtive look of extreme nervousness. So, indeed, might anyone else; for he was alternately pink and yellow as to the complexion, while his fingers were as difficult to keep quiet as Michael Scott's familiar spirit.

Kensington followed him in five minutes; he had no occasion to practise the glance of a master, for he always looked as if everything belonged to him; and Brixton suddenly felt his satisfied sense of heirship begin to wither and contract within his swelling bosom, while perplexities and confusion began to fill the vacant space. But a keener observer would have seen that Kensington, too, was uneasy; there was a sullen flush on his brow, and his heavy moustache was not left for a moment in peace. He was pretty well used to playing for high stakes, but never for any quite so high as these.

"How do, old fellow?" he exclaimed cheerily. "This is the last scene of the play, I suppose. We shall soon know our fate."

"Yes," said Brixton. He could not think of anything else to say.

"Well, good luck to the winner, and good temper to the loser, say I; and which ever way it goes, may we shake hands in half an hour as good friends as now!"

"We ought to have something to drink that in," said Brixton, with a feeble attempt at good-fellowship; "it's too good a toast to waste on air."

Somehow, he had not the courage to ring the bell, but Kensington instantly did so, and both the young men were glad to swallow a glass of wine before Mr. Picton entered, carrying a long blue envelope, and invested with the dignity of the messenger of fate.

"Good-morning, gentlemen," said Mr. Picton. "Mr. Marston from Yorkshire is not here, I see."

"No," answered Kensington; "he has not received your note; it is lying waiting for him at my chambers. He went out

on Tuesday evening, and I have heard nothing of him since."

"Dear me!" said Mr. Picton; "I hope there is no reason to be anxious about him."

"I did not think so until to-day," answered Kensington quite frankly. "He has been staying with me for some time, but we never kept any regular hours; he went and came as he pleased, and sometimes slept out without giving me notice. But in my uncle's state of health it does not seem likely that he would be absent from town so long without explanation. Still, it is not two whole days since he left, so it is rather too soon to raise the hue-and-cry."

"At any rate, that is not our present business," remarked Mr. Picton. "It appears useless to wait for him, and I will, therefore, proceed to the reading of the will."

The Alans listened eagerly while the tortuous sentences were unreeled to them, but neither grasped their full purport as they were read.

"So, you see," the lawyer summed up, "the whole property and business are left to a nephew only distinguished as the husband of Miss Lucy Scott, and the first thing that I have to do is to enquire if such a marriage has taken place, and if so, who is the happy man?"

"I am the happy man," exclaimed Brixton promptly. "I was selected by my uncle to be her husband. I have his note. I knew nothing about the inheritance. I never asked; but he entrusted her to me."

"Your assertion, sir, is absurdly unfounded," said Kensington in his haughtiest tones. "I have the happiness to be the young lady's husband; I was married to her on Tuesday evening, by special licence, by my poor uncle's death-bed. He gave away the bride, and the Rev. James Wilson performed the ceremony. Here is the certificate."

And he handed a paper to Mr. Picton.

"Impossible," cried Brixton, white with rage. "I am the man. It is a lie—a forgery. Ask Mrs. White—she was at the marriage."

"Ask whom you please," returned Kensington; "here is my certificate. And let me tell you, that if you give me the lie a second time in the house where my wife is living, and my uncle lying dead, I will thrash you within an inch of your life the moment I get you outside it."

"No quarrelling, gentlemen, if you please," put in Mr. Picton; "this is far too serious a matter. Am I really to understand that you both claim to be married to the lady?"

"I can only answer for myself," said Kensington.

"And I for myself," said Brixton. "Call in Mrs. White."

"Remember," continued the lawyer, "that one of you is certainly exposing himself to a charge of felony, if he persists in a claim which must be without foundation, and which can be easily disproved. Mrs. White, you say" (to Brixton) "witnessed the marriage?"

"Also the man who was attending on my uncle," added Kensington.

"There is also the clergyman," Mr. Picton went on, "and, above all, the bride herself. It is impossible that the real bridegroom can have any difficulty in establishing his identity, and then nothing but the shame of a useless fraud will fall upon the pretender. Let me withdraw these harsh words; let us say that a practical joke has been attempted—in bad taste, no doubt, but still not carried too far—and let the matter never be heard of beyond this room."

He looked from one to the other; Kensington looked back at him quietly, and waited for Brixton to speak. Brixton sat, changing colour, but with a dogged set of his thin lips. All that he did was to take a note in his uncle's handwriting out of his pocket, and lay it on the table beside Kensington's certificate. Mr. Picton glanced it over.

"This is evidence of the intention," he said, "but not of the act."

"As to notes," remarked Kensington, "I have my note too, but it is from the lady. I don't mean to produce it, if I can help it."

"As to the act," answered Brixton, disregarding his cousin, "if you don't believe me, call in Mrs. White. She was there."

"I certainly shall not let the dispute go beyond the family, as long as I can help it," Mr. Picton replied. "I see I must refer it to Mrs. Marston herself."

"By all means," said Kensington.

Brixton nodded. He seemed determined to say as little as possible.

The cousins maintained no further pretence of friendship when they were left alone together. Each shielded his countenance behind a newspaper, while he awaited the return of Mr. Picton from

that interview with Lucy which has been already related. It was more than half an hour before he appeared, and then his countenance was even graver than before. He briefly informed them that, owing to the darkness of the room, and the other peculiar circumstances of her marriage, Mrs. Marston was unable to speak positively on the point, and that therefore he should be obliged to institute a regular enquiry into the evidence, if they still maintained their claims. Kensington was still resolute; Brixton was still dogged; and consequently a second appointment was made for the following morning, when Mr. Picton hoped to be the *Œdipus* who should solve the all-important riddle—Which of them?

CHAPTER VIII.

AND where, meantime, was Yorkshire?

It was quite true, as Kensington said, that he had gone out on Tuesday evening; but it was also true that he had returned soon after eight, and found Kensington enjoying himself by his domestic hearth, offering to the Lares the incense of some excellent tobacco, and to himself the libation of an occasional mouthful of very good claret.

"What news?" asked Kensington lazily. Then he caught sight of something unusual in Yorkshire's face, as he hesitated to answer, and questioned him more sharply: "What's up? Come, out with it; I see you've got news."

"I have just seen my uncle die," said Yorkshire slowly.

Kensington sprang to his feet with one of his favourite expletives, and broke his pet pipe against the mantelpiece.

"Dead! Is he? So soon? By Jove, I never expected it!"

"He has been much worse these two last days."

"Yes; but he was always being worse, and better again. I wish I had gone there to-day, instead of sending."

"He was too ill to see anyone."

"Yes; but it would have looked better, and it might have been of importance, if he put off signing his will to the last. One never knows what whims these old men will take when they're at the last gasp. Do you know if he had done it?"

"Not in the least; nobody has mentioned it."

"I'll bet you a fiver he's left it all to Lucy, and we must look sharp about our

wooing. Fair play, mind you, my boy, and all above-board."

"I would rather it were not all left to Lucy," said Yorkshire thoughtfully.

"What the devil's that to you?" snapped Kensington.

"A good deal, seeing that I was married to her this evening."

"You lie!" shouted the other.

"Be careful, I will not take that word from you again. I don't wonder you are disappointed and angry; I was very much taken by surprise myself. Lucy and I have understood each other for some time, and this evening she wrote to me, by my uncle's desire, to say that we should be married at once. He had arranged everything, and we were married in his room. He was dying at the time—he died immediately after it was over, when he was trying to speak to us."

The young man's voice broke, and he put up his hand to his eyes for a moment. Kensington, mad with rage, made a spring forward, and, with one blow, knocked him down. His head struck the corner of the mantelpiece as he fell, crashing heavily among the chairs and fire-irons, and he lay a motionless heap upon the floor. The noise gave Horton a good excuse for hurrying in; he had not far to come. Kensington poured out the story, mixed with oaths and epithets which would have made it incoherent to anyone less accustomed to bad language as a fringe of conversation. Horton stood contemplating the prostrate body of his master's cousin with the coolest nonchalance, while he listened to the tale which Kensington wound up with—

"And now I suppose I've killed him. Do see, Horton; I hate to touch him. I didn't want to do it, and I didn't do it; it was the mantelpiece."

"No reason why you shouldn't do it," remarked Horton, kneeling down to examine Yorkshire, "especially as it was the mantelpiece. I was looking in at the door and saw it all. You quarrelled; he struck you first—you returned the blow; no, his foot slipped on the tiles when he was hitting at you; down he comes—knocks his head against the mantelpiece—concussion of the brain, inquest, medical evidence, fine young fellow, unfortunate accident, universal sympathy for the survivor. Confound it all! The fool isn't dead!"

"No such luck," said Kensington gloomily.

"Just now you thought it was bad luck

if he was dead. Help me along with him to his bed; we must do the thing properly."

Horton's respectfulness for his master was always of a somewhat intermittent type, and under the stress of the present crisis it altogether disappeared. On the other hand, Kensington felt so utterly foiled by the unexpected turn of events, and so entirely incapable of making any use of the helpless condition of his rival, that he gladly abandoned the helm to his valet, who seemed to have some notion of a course to be steered. Between them, poor Yorkshire was very untenderly conveyed to bed, and flung down upon it with little care as to the possible results of a bump more or less to his brain and his bruises.

"What shall we do now?" asked Kensington.

"You can smoke a pipe, while I go for a doctor. I know the right sort of fellow—one who keeps his eyes in his pockets, and believes his ears. Don't you forget how it happened, if he asks any questions; but I think he knows better."

The doctor soon came, a dilapidated specimen of his kind, chiefly desirous of pocketing a real gold sovereign with the least possible delay. He pronounced that there was concussion of the brain, probably not serious, but might be so; there was no occasion to call in a second opinion, as the treatment in such cases was very simple, and he could call in again in the morning.

"He's much more than half drunk," observed Horton, after he had departed; "and whatever happens to-night, he'll swear to-morrow that he always said it would be so."

"Whatever happens!" Kensington repeated. "What are you up to now, Horton? I won't have any foul play here."

"Who said anything about foul play?" retorted the other. "The game has to be won—that's all; but I must know more of how the land lies. It'll be time enough to do all that doctoring business by-and-by; just turn the key on him now, sir, and you go out and get some supper. I'll go up to Russell Square, and find out as much as I can."

So poor Yorkshire was left, untended and uncared-for, lying unconscious, while his precious pair of hosts went their several ways, and met again, some hours later, to discuss the situation. Horton was in high glee, and extremely respectful again.

"It's the greatest lark, sir," he declared;

"they're all in the most precious muddle that ever was. The old gentleman's dead, sure enough, and nobody knows anything about the will. Consequently, they all swear that everything's left to Miss Scott—Mrs. Marston, that is; for it's quite true she was married this evening."

"Then it's all up," remarked Kensington gloomily.

"Up? Not a bit of it! Here's where the laugh comes in. All the house knows that there was a wedding; but there aren't three of them agreed as to who the bridegroom was."

"Why, it was Yorkshire here!"

"So he told you; but Mrs. White swears it was Brixton, and Jane the housemaid knows that it was you."

"Me!"

"You, sir. She got the bedroom door open, and peeped in, and saw the ceremony, and she is sure that you were the bridegroom. Miss Scott was very anxious that nothing should be known about what was going on, and forbade Mrs. White to tell the servants; but, of course, the women sniffed a wedding in the air. And Thomas, who opened the door to the bridegroom and the clergyman, says it was you. He's a chum of mine, and for a couple of sovereigns he'd swear it."

"Who wants him to? It's nonsense!" said the bewildered Kensington.

"They all came round me," pursued Horton, "like flies round a treacle-pot, for me to settle it. I couldn't make out what they were after at first; but I kept quiet till I saw which way the wind blew, and then I only chaffed them all round, and left them as wise as they were before. But now I see our line, as straight as a railway-cutting."

"It's more than I do, I'm sure," returned his master.

"Why, look here, sir. The chances are that the money is left to the young lady. The lawyer wasn't there this evening, and there was no signing of wills; so Mr. Marston must have made his will before he had settled on her husband. At least, it seems likely, things having been so hurried up at the last. Of course she married the farmer, but everyone was in such a muddle that she can't get many to swear to it. Suppose he never comes near her again, and you appear and claim to be her husband? You are just about the same height and size as he is; there are two will swear to your being the bridegroom, and the others will be puzzled, and afraid

to swear you ain't. You've got the evidence; it's all in his pocket in the other room——"

"And my name is the same as his," broke in Kensington, who had revived into eager excitement as Horton unfolded his plan.

"To be sure, sir; now you see it. It's as neat—as neat—as a chess-board," concluded Horton.

"But Lucy? She'll swear she never married me."

"Twenty to one she didn't know whether she was on her head or her heels, or married to the parish beadle. But if she does, you can put it to her, in private, that he's bolted and deserted her, or has another wife somewhere, or something of the sort. That she'll be disgraced and made a story of if the thing is known, and you step in to save her; and that having your name in the register makes the marriage all right. Women will believe anything about law and business, if you only speak positively, and tell them they can't understand the particulars. Then you mix up the sweet, you know——"

"That's my business," interrupted Kensington. "Don't trouble yourself to give me advice about the lady; tell me what we can do with this lout. He may come round in the middle of it all and spoil our little game."

"Not a bit of it; he won't come round." (There was something in Horton's tone that his master did not like; it implied an "He sha'n't," from which Kensington rather revolted, but he held his tongue.) "And when he's off the hooks, or nearly so, I know what to do with him."

"It's an awful risky game altogether," said Kensington slowly. "And suppose the money isn't left in a lump to Lucy after all, but divided somehow, a nice mess I shall have got into for nothing!"

"That's true," observed Horton; "there's always a chance of that. Best thing is to keep this fellow here, quiet and stupid, until the will has been read. Then, if we don't want him, we can take him to a hospital, and by the time he's well, he won't know how he got hurt. If we do want him—well, we'll use him."

Having arrived at this conclusion, Horton condescended to pay some attention to Yorkshire's condition, and he carried out the doctor's directions as far as was necessary to produce a respectable effect. Alan was still quite unconscious, and continued so until the afternoon of the next day, when a dose of medicine, ad-

ministered by Horton, sent him back into the great blank that lies behind our conscious life. So matters went on, up to the Friday morning when Mr. Picton proposed to meet for the second time the rival cousins, and hold a formal investigation of their claims.

Kensington had taken a great deal of keeping up to the point during the thirty-six hours that intervened between his acceptance of Horton's scheme and his committing himself to it by action. As a matter of taste, he disliked becoming a swindler; as a matter of prudence, he appreciated the risks attendant on it more highly than Horton did. He was fully aware that failure might mean imprisonment, and his imagination furnished him with a lively picture of all the inexpressibly vulgar and unpleasant details of such a sequel.

But there was a companion-picture, on which the same imagination turned an equally strong light. His creditors had given him a breathing-space on the strength of his presumed engagement to his uncle's heiress. Let it but once be known that she was married to someone else, and he was out in the cold, and they would be down on him like harpies. He would have to give up his chambers, to skulk about London for fear of arrest, or drag out a dull life in cheap places on the Continent, on a small allowance from his father—at any rate, to lose his place in the world, and be nobody.

Villainy in the one scale and honesty in the other did not alter the weights much when Kensington held the scales; his conscience was attenuated from want of nutriment, and put little pressure in the balance. The mean, miserable certainty kicked the beam, and he chose to play for the high stakes.

He went to Russell Square on the Thursday morning with this resolution in his pocket, determined to act upon it or not according to the contents of the will. These drove the last lingering hesitation from his mind. In a moment he committed himself to the bolder course, and initiated the complication which so closely enveloped the great question—Which of them?

DETECTIVES AND THEIR WORK.

SINCE dynamite outrages, and threats and rumours of dynamite outrages, have become a sort of institution in the land,

our detective force and its organisation have been subjected to a good deal of adverse criticism. That such criticism, even when pitched in a scornful key, has been well meant, that there has been no intention to do injustice to the force, goes without saying. Nevertheless a considerable amount of injustice has been done. Many of those who have "rushed in" as critics, have evidently written without knowledge of their subject, have apparently gone upon the principle of the reviewer who did not read the books he had to notice lest he should be prejudiced. That our detectives have not been particularly successful in apprehending the perpetrators of such dynamite outrages as have become accomplished facts is no doubt true; but they have probably done much more in the way of preventing purposed crimes of this kind than could be safely made known, or than their adverse critics would be prepared to give them credit for. That they should frequently fail to discover the criminals who commit these outrages ought scarcely to be matter for surprise, and is certainly no justification for condemning them as a generally incompetent and ill-constituted body. Dynamiting is so far like ordinary crimes that it is difficult of detection in proportion to its ease of commission, and how easy of commission it may be to any savage depraved enough to be regardless of its consequences to others, a little reflection will make evident. But it is not an ordinary crime, and it is a new one. Assassination of individual rulers, or ministers, we have had from of old, but the modern dynamiter, the wholesale indiscriminate assassin, in comparison with whom the Thug was an embodiment of sweetness and light—this monstrosity, until it sprang into existence, was a creature that the ordinary mind was incapable of even imagining. So abhorrent and anti-human a crime as dynamiting was undreamed of in the philosophy alike of those who organised our detective force, and those who framed the laws by which its powers of action are limited. Any detective force might well be unable to immediately hunt down such abnormal criminals as dynamiters. As a matter of fact, dynamiting is a crime for the suppression and punishment of which informers rather than detectives must be the instruments. To conclude—we won't say to reason—from their having hitherto been unable to stamp out dynamite plots and threats that our detective force is only so in name, and is practically a useless

body—to conclude this is worse than illogical—is nonsensical, that is, unless it is to be taken simply as proof of ignorance.

It is said that our plain-clothes men are more a detected than a detective body; that, whether or not the members of the criminal classes are well known to them, they are well known to the members of the criminal classes. This knowledge upon the part of the latter classes, it is argued, makes our detective organisation a delusion and a snare. That there is "something in" such a line of argument, and that to the uninitiated there may well appear to be "everything" in it, may be freely conceded; but the something is at best not much, and in practice its value to criminals is largely, if not wholly, neutralised by other points bearing upon the general position on this head. No doubt there are times when the fact of our detectives being known is a disadvantage, but there are also times when it is an advantage. Many of those who condemn the detective force as at present constituted, are under the impression that criminals act upon the principle of "hanging together lest they should be hanged separately." But they do not. They go in fear of each other, but there is no honour among them for honour's sake. They "play for safety," each for his own hand, and a favourite method with them of doing so is to "round" upon each other. Rounding is constantly going on among them—rounding that leads to apprehensions and convictions, and that would not take place if the detectives were not known to criminals. Many a shady customer will, for reasons of his or her own, quietly "give the office" to a detective whom he knows, and who he is assured will not "bring him into it," but will stick to the "from information received" line. Hosts of criminals, or associates of criminals, will "round" in this way who would never go to any office to be "took down," and who would be much too "fly" to be "drawn" by anyone who was a stranger to them. Again, if an "habitual," when on criminal purpose bent, perceives that he has been spotted by a detective whom he knows, and who he is aware knows him, he will, in all probability, "drop it," for the time being at any rate. Under such circumstances he does not need to be told that in case any job in his line were to be brought off in the neighbourhood in which he had been seen he would be bound to be "lumbered" on suspicion. Of course, a detective who was unknown to the criminal might

follow him up, and might, or might not, take him "in the act," but in such cases certain prevention is, perhaps, as desirable as possible apprehension. It should be remembered, too, that plain-clothes officers have other duties to perform besides that of watching suspects. They have to make arrests and searches under warrants, and openly seek out witnesses; have to be constantly entering the lion's den—the "hot" quarters of their divisions. In doing this they carry their lives in their hands even as things stand, but their lives would be worth far less purchase if they were not known. The knowledge that they are detectives, and "have the law at their backs," carries moral weight—serves them in much the same stead in the way of protection that his uniform does the ordinary police-constable. The detectives are, of course, not loved by the criminal classes, but, being known, they are in a certain sense respected, and are not regarded as mere prowling spies. They get the benefit of the sentiment that exists—though not, perhaps, in a very exalted degree—even in the minds of the criminal classes—the sentiment that finds expression in the saying that, after all, the detectives are only doing their duty, that their proceedings are all in their day's work, and that they have no special feeling of enmity against those they hunt down. Often enough, a criminal who for the moment has nothing to fear—who, say, has just come out from "doing time," and has not yet committed any fresh offence—will be upon quite good terms with the detectives of his division. Indeed, it not unfrequently happens that a detective "picks up a wrinkle" from some incautious word or over-sharp bit of chaff let fall by an habitual with whom he is so far on friendly relations.

Though the fact of the detective being known thus cuts both ways, he would still be known were his identification wholly a disadvantage. That is a necessary outcome of our existing criminal law. Under that law, the detective must go into the witness-box in open court, so that any who may consider it their interest to be able to recognise him at sight have ample opportunities afforded them for seeing him. Apart from this, from his having to make arrests, or execute search-warrants, he would be known to the criminal classes of his division, and it is among the habitual criminals of his division and their associates that the bulk of the work of a

detective lies. A detective, to be fairly efficient, must be acquainted with the runs and "ropes" of the shady quarters of his district; must know their principal inhabitants, and their lines of business, and, to a certain extent, their habits of life. He must know by sight, and beyond any reasonable possibility of mistaking their identity, the more distinguished and dangerous "corner-men" of the locality. The latter is sometimes a very important branch of knowledge. It may fall out that the "clue" to the detection of a crime lies in the absence from his usual haunt of some corner-man known or judged to be capable of such a crime. It can be taken for granted that he has not "stepped it" save for sufficient reasons, and if no other reason is known, it is always worth while to open up investigations on the supposition that he may have been associated with the particular crime in question. Such kind and degree of knowledge a detective could not obtain without becoming known. A pretence of "slumming" as an amusement could not be carried to a sufficient extent for the purpose in view. The shady classes do not mind a sightseer coming into their midst for the once, and the mere passer-by in their quarters need, as a rule, have nothing to fear, if he only has common-sense enough not to make a parade of any snatchable property. But of any "foreigners" found in their quarter more than once, and having no known business there, they would at once be suspicious. The relieving officer, the parish doctor, the School Board officer, the vaccination officer, the accredited agents of religious missions, the sanitary inspector, all these official foreigners are in shady quarters known to the "natives," and are protected by their offices.

As matters stand at present, the detectives of a district are equally well known, and are also protected by their office—otherwise we should much more frequently hear of detectives being crippled, or "corpsed." That they should move openly in criminal haunts is probably the lesser of a choice of evils. To get through the details of his work a plain-clothes officer must show up pretty freely, and however much he might try to keep himself unknown, he would almost inevitably be found out. A "foreigner" other than such officials as those named above found "mouching about" in neighbourhoods in which the criminal and no-visible-means-of-support classes congregate would be set down as a

detective, even if he were not one, and a detective who was spotted while trying to keep himself dark, would run much greater risks of rough usage than one whose calling was practically avowed.

The extreme critics of the detective force, not only complain that the members of that force are known to the criminal classes, but add that anyone may recognise them at a glance by their policeman's walk. This latter statement, however, we venture to assert would, if put to the test, be found to be a mistaken one. Detectives are not branded by any distinctive walk or bearing. When off duty, or walking simply to get over the ground, the detective walks just as other men. When on the watch with a definite object in view, he necessarily accommodates his pace to that of the person he is watching. If generally on the look-out for anything that may turn up, he may walk slowly or loungingly, but even then his walk is no more a policeman's march than it is the walk of—say—any working-man who may be out shop-window gazing, or for a leisurely evening stroll. If a plain-clothes man is brought from one division to another on some special business, or when a new man is first put on in a division, it generally proves a surprise, a case of "Who'd have thought it?" even to the habitués. They only come to know the strange or new men for what they are, when some official act proclaims their office. And if it is thus with the professionals, those who see most of detectives, and who often have reason to fear each bush an officer—if it is thus with them, it may be taken as certain that amateur criminals or honest outsiders cannot recognise detectives offhand.

It is said again that the detectives, being recruited from the ranks of the ordinary police force, cannot be expected to be men of such a degree of intelligence as ought to be characteristic of detectives. On this head it does not seem to be taken into account that the detective, unlike the poet, is not born. He is made, and all things considered, it is questionable whether there is any better method of making him than by previous training as a constable. It is necessary that he should be a man of good physique, and it is exceedingly doubtful whether any man, combining the physique of a policeman with the super-subtle intellect which some people regard as the essential attribute of a detective, would care to become a plain-clothes officer, even

if the position were offered to him, without his being asked to undergo any previous training. The man endowed with such a combination of physical and mental qualities would be able to command success in more pleasant and profitable callings than that of a detective. That the average "uniform" constable is to be esteemed rather for his bodily than his mental powers is no doubt true; but there are in the police force many men above the average, and it is from among these that promotion to detective rank is made. Those who do become detectives in this way, may not stand out as world's wonders in inductive reasoning, analysis of character, or divination of motive. Still, they are men of nerve, resourceful, self-reliant, courageous, and have special knowledge of the ways of criminals, and special experience in dealing with them.

In judging detectives and their work, many people are apt to take the detectives of the stage and of fiction as their standards of comparison, and compared with Vidocq, Hawkshaw, Mr. Bucket, or the still more marvellous detectives of Poe's stories, the plain-clothes men of real life are unquestionably an inferior race. It should be borne in mind, though, that the playwright or novelist is very much master of the situation, seeing that he creates it. He can control circumstances, and make everything fit in, but the detective of everyday life is controlled by circumstances, and about the worse fault he can have is to try to make things fit in to his foregone conclusion of the explanation of any more or less mysterious crime. While, however, the ordinary detective compares unfavourably with the more famous of his brethren of fiction, he contrasts very favourably indeed with the "duffing" creature whom latter-day critics of the force appear to have evolved from an inner consciousness.

Whether or not a secret police—a police that would not have to present themselves at police-stations, or give evidence, or make arrests, and that would be known only by and accountable to the chiefs of their department—whether such a police as this would be tolerated by public opinion in England, and whether, if it were, it would be more successful than Continental secret police have been in suppressing dynamiting and bringing dynamiters to book, are points that need not be discussed here.

Meanwhile, however, it is a mistake in policy as well as upon the facts of the case

to hold up to general condemnation our existing detective force, simply because it has not as yet been entirely successful in dealing with such a crime as dynamiting.

LADY LOVELACE.

BY THE AUTHOR OF "JUDITH WYNNE," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER XLV.

EDIE'S expectations of "coming upon Phil somewhere or other" were not disappointed, although the results of such chance encounters were scarcely what she had expected. On her first arrival in town she had not felt equal to mounting Coquette—who, however, had been sent up after her mistress from Stanham—so Mr. Fairfax had hired the best carriage and horses the Alexandra stables had at command, the coachman had turned his horses' heads in the direction of Hyde Park, and just as Edie and her father drove in through the gates, Ellinor, Lucy, and Phil came riding out.

Ellinor, it was evident, did not so much as see the occupants of the carriage, whose coachman so obligingly slackened pace to allow the equestrians to pass. It was possibly a pardonable shortsightedness, for Phil rode between her and the Squire's victoria. Rode, indeed, so closely to the wheel that Edie could have touched his horse's head as he passed. And he saw her no more than did Ellinor.

For a very good reason, too. His eyes were fastened so intently on Miss Yorke's face that all creation beside must have been a blank to him. Edie noted his look, and compared it mentally with one she had once before seen on his face on a certain occasion when Ellinor had chosen to break up a whist-party with a song. To her fancy it seemed compounded three parts of admiration—not a jot less—one part of an eager, questioning doubt.

"Edie, look at those greys—what superb action!" said the Squire from the other side at that moment.

He, good man, in the Park never saw aught but the horses. All the crowned heads of Europe might have ridden past him, he would have seen naught but the heads, legs, manes, and tails of the animals they rode.

"Can't see anything, papa," replied Edie promptly; "I've something in my eye."

It was perfectly true. She had some-

thing in her eye—in both eyes, that is—hot, scalding tears of wounded pride.

Some weeks passed after this before Edie and Phil chanced upon each other again. Weeks during which Colonel Wickham made a variety of futile efforts to throw the young people into each other's way. He made little dinners, and he made evenings at the play, at every one of which Phil failed to make his appearance, pleading always as his excuse a previous engagement with Miss Yorke.

The Colonel, on the few occasions on which he chanced to find Phil at home at his rooms, made one or two efforts at cross-questioning. But Phil refused to be cross-questioned.

"Why go over old ground?" he would say, with an ugly frown on his heretofore good-tempered brow. "One or other of us would be sure to lose his temper."

And he would immediately take up his hat, plead an engagement, and leave his uncle in sole possession of his quarters.

So the Colonel gave it up for the nonce, feeling that after all there was nothing for it but to wait.

Meantime, Edie and her father were having but a sorry time of it together. Edie was captious, whimsical, and irritable to the last degree.

"The weather is—well, let's say changeable, just now," the Squire would say pathetically to one or other of his old friends whom he was meeting every day at his club; "and talk about 'the three old maids of Lee, who were cross as cross could be,' I've a young maid at home who could beat them hollow at that game." But he never failed to wind up with a pitying "Poor little thing! it's her illness that has tried her nerves; by-and-by she'll be her old bright self again."

However, as time went on, Edie showed more signs of developing a new self than of recovering her old one. Her desires every day seemed to take a new turn. One day it was: "Papa, I want you to teach me whist, so that I may play with you and Colonel Wickham on wet days."

"Good Heavens, my dear, you don't mean to suggest a dummy!" ejaculated the Squire.

"Well, why not a dummy, or two dummies, for the matter of that! I'm sure I could take all the tricks if you'd only tell me how."

"No doubt, my dear—no doubt," acquiesced the Squire; "you'd trump all your partner's best cards and then lead out your aces and kings."

"Well, why not? So long as I took the tricks, what could it matter?"

Then the Squire, who had by this time learnt the futility of contradicting Edie in any one of her whims, would content himself with a silent shrug of his shoulders, and would get out of ear-shot as quickly as possible.

She nearly took her father's breath away on one occasion by informing him, in a terribly resolute tone, that she wanted him to put an advertisement in the Times for a companion for her. "For I'm sick and tired of old Janet, papa," she went on; "she agrees with every word I say, and pulls a long face over me every time she comes into the room. Why, only yesterday, she told me 'I might as well be a lily for all the colour I had,' and actually, this morning, she comes to me and tells me I've grown so thin she must 'take all my dresses in.' The ridiculousness of the thing, when I'm getting fatter and fatter every day! Don't you see I am, papa? Just look how fat my cheeks are, and rosy, too, just like a farmer's daughter's."

"Of course—of course, Edie; anyone with eyes in his head could see that," agreed the Squire, looking a little sadly at his daughter's pale face and hollow cheeks; "never looked better in your life! What could Janet be thinking about?"

"That's just what I asked her, papa, and I told her at once to let every one of my dresses out under the arms this afternoon; they were so tight I could scarcely breathe in them."

"My dear, won't that rather spoil the look of them?"

"Oh, what do I care so long as I am not squeezed in? And now you see how stupid the old thing is, I want you to advertise for a companion for me—some one, of course, above Janet in station, a nice, quick-tempered person——"

"Quick tempered, Edie?"

"Papa, I know what I'm saying! A nice, quick-tempered person, with plenty of ideas in her head, and a grand capacity for argument——"

"Edie, Edie, the house wouldn't hold you two for a week!"

"Wouldn't hold us for a week!" repeated Edie in mild astonishment. "Why, anyone to hear you talk, papa, would think I had a right-down bad temper."

"No, no, no, my dear; nothing was farther from my thoughts than that. I

made a mistake. What I meant to say was, that the house wouldn't hold me for a week under the circumstances."

And with that the Squire once more beat a hurried retreat.

But Edie's latest proposal, made one morning over the breakfast-table, being a little more within the bounds of reason, he was only too delighted to gratify. It was that Coquette should be saddled at once—that very minute, and that she and he should both go for a canter somewhere or other. Richmond Park, perhaps, or Roehampton—or anywhere else as far from the smoky houses as they could get.

"Delighted, I'm sure, my dear," said the Squire, jumping to his feet with alacrity. "I'll give the order at once, and while Coquette is being brought round, I'll just jump into a hansom and run over to Wickham's, and ask him to bid for me at Tattersall's to-day. There's a sale on, and there's a two-year-old going that I've rather set my mind on."

The Squire arrived at Colonel Wickham's hotel to find Phil all alone in the sitting-room. He made a sort of spring at the young man, and shook him heartily by the hand.

"Why, Phil, my boy, I am glad to see you!" he cried. "But how is it you haven't turned up at our diggings—the Alexandra, you know? Between ourselves I'm sure little Edie would be uncommonly glad to see you—you know it doesn't do to take all my little girl says for gospel. And also"—here the Squire looked a little nervously over his shoulder to make sure there were no listeners—"between ourselves, I would very much prefer you for a son-in-law to your uncle, much as I respect him."

Phil felt sorely troubled. All in a flash there seemed to pass before him the old happy lovemaking days at Stanham, when he had had a clear, untroubled conscience, a true and honest heart.

Heaven help him! The Phil of those days had been dead and buried for many a month past.

Colonel Wickham, coming in at that moment, must have heard the Squire's concluding words, for he said very gravely, as he shook hands:

"The young people appear to have decided that matter in a manner that does not admit of interference;" and looked so keenly at Phil as he said it that Phil was bound to take it as a straightforward meant-to-be-answered question.

It was one, however, that he had no

intention of answering. He jumped up hurriedly, and took his hat.

"I've an engagement—I'm over-due now, in fact," he cried, pulling out his watch. "I only came in to say I can't dine with you to-night, nor to-morrow night, nor any night this week; I'm up to my eyes in engagements just now."

Then he said a hurried good-bye to Mr. Fairfax, and made his way quickly out of the room and down the stairs.

Edie had her habit on in five minutes. She waited for her father exactly another five minutes; then she made up her mind that he must have said all he had to say to Colonel Wickham—before he had even had time to get to the end of Piccadilly—rang the bell, ordered another cab to be fetched for her, jumped into it, and followed on the Squire's traces as fast as possible.

"For," as she characteristically said to herself as she went along, "I would sooner be driving backwards and forwards all day than waiting in that fusty room."

So Phil, going downstairs in hot haste, found himself suddenly confronted by a small dark figure in riding-hat and habit, whom his heart told him all in a bound was Edie Fairfax—his own Edie not so very long ago.

Edie looked up at him. Phil looked down on her.

"Oh, Phil!" "Oh, Edie!" almost simultaneously escaped their lips, in precisely their old easy, familiar style, as each gave a great start.

Then there seemed to come a hot rush of blood to Edie's brain; the staircase, the walls, grew misty and indistinct to her; she stumbled forward, catching her feet in her long skirt.

"Take care, Edie, you will fall," said Phil, gathering together her habit into one thick fold, and putting it into her hand as he had many a hundred times before.

Where were all the grand speeches, questions, expostulations, Edie had planned to address to Phil the "very next time she set eyes on him"? Somehow not one of them rose to her lips now. She darted forward somewhat as one in a burning house, half blinded with smoke, makes a rush for the free air, reached the top of the stairs breathless, paused a moment outside the door, then dashed into Colonel Wickham's room, exclaiming in a terribly astonished tone:

"Why, papa, how much longer are you going to keep me waiting! I've been expect-

ing you back for the last hour and a half. We shall get nowhere to-day, unless we set off at once!"

And Phil went on his way down the stairs into the street, for the next ten or fifteen minutes finding thought simply an impossibility.

He was engaged to ride with Ellinor that morning, to lunch with her afterwards; but somehow neither engagement did he feel equal to fulfilling. Instead of making his way back through Piccadilly to Grosvenor Square, as he had intended, he turned down a by-street off the Strand, and went along the Embankment at an altogether reckless pace for a man who had on patent-leather boots, which he wished to present spotless in a lady's drawing-room half an hour afterwards.

If it be possible for a man all in a flash "in a moment of time" to see his lost Eden in another's face, that man was Phil Wickham, the face was Edie Fairfax's. The kindly hearty pressure of the Squire's hand had struck the key-note of his regrets over his dead past, the look into little Edie's upturned face had completed the chord. What a world of honest, simple, trustful sweetness had shone in that face, sadly changed though it was from the face on which he had imprinted his passionate kiss on that 1st of October, which seemed now, alas! so long ago. A face like Edie's of the smiling, childlike type does not age easily; tears somehow seem to wash away so readily, leaving no traces behind, and no amount of anxiety or worry will crimp it into wrinkles. But, nevertheless, there will come a wistful sadness into the eyes, a childish pleading mournfulness will gather about the mouth, far more touching than any amount of wrinkles or tears.

Phil thought of Ellinor's eyes, and he thought of Edie's. Ellinor's could blaze with a passion, could deepen and darken with a tenderness for which little Edie's had no capacity; but the sweet, trustful, honest gaze, the soft, pleading, wistful look, she could no more put into them than she could have gathered and appropriated the light of the stars of heaven.

It was fully four o'clock in the afternoon before he made his way to Grosvenor Square. He found Ellinor alone in the drawing-room; she had denied herself to all visitors but him. She was seated as usual on a big sofa; a little to her right hand stood a table with a pile of neatly-written notes upon it. She did not rise to

meet Phil, but she smiled sweetly enough up at him.

"Late, late—so late!" she said; "I have a great mind to say as the song does, 'You cannot enter in.'" Then she noticed his dusty and disquieted appearance, and in a somewhat concerned tone asked him: "What is it—what has happened?"

His answer was not to the point. He seated himself beside her on the sofa, took her hand in his, looking up forlornly into her beautiful face.

"Ellinor," he said, "for the love of Heaven be to me more than you are, or be nothing at all to me!"

It was less a speech than a moan, the sort of prayer a man dying on a battlefield might utter could he see an angel passing to and fro amid the broken, bleeding hosts; a plaint which meant, "Give me life or give me death, whichever you have at command."

Then he dropped her hand, bowed his head on the small table beside them, hiding his face in his outstretched arms.

Ellinor did not show her surprise. She half turned and faced him, answering his meaning rather than his exact words.

"Supposing," she said quietly, "I have given you all I have to bestow, and have nothing left to give. What then?"

Phil made no reply, nor did he lift his head.

Ellinor went on:

"Shall I take you at your word and say, 'I will be nothing to you, take your liberty and go.'"

Had she rehearsed these words for dramatic purposes, a score or so of times before, she could not have said them with a more poignant scorn.

Phil lifted up his white wretched face.

"Great Heavens—no!" he cried; "not to purchase my salvation could I give you up now;" and he threw his arms about her and held her tight to his heart. "Yet," he cried, suddenly releasing her and almost pushing her from him, "Good Heaven! what has come to me? Am I going mad, or is it possible for a man to love two women at one and the same time."

He had evidently forgotten the assertion he had made to Edie so serenely once upon a time that "A man's eyes might be fascinated while his heart remained untouched and his brain condemned."

A look of unmitigated scorn overspread Ellinor's face—much such a look as hers might the "Queen with swarthy cheeks and bold, black eyes" have flashed upon

her Roman Antony when she insinuated so softly, "Fulvia perchance is angry."

"Ah," she said, in low yet contemptuous tones, "the thing stands explained now. You have seen my little country cousin, and she has upset your nerves."

"My little country cousin" was the designation Ellinor generally bestowed upon Edie. To say truth, the fact of Edie having been born and bred in the country was the most vulnerable point in her armour Ellinor could discover, and she laid her finger upon it accordingly. Had Edie been uncultured, unrefined in her manners, awkward or barbaric in her dress (adopting such atrocities as artificial flowers, bead trimmings, plaids, or dyed feathers), Ellinor would have had a whole vocabulary of pointed epithets at command. But as Edie erred in none of these respects, "My little country cousin" was the only term with a sufficiency of truth in it to pin the epithet to Edie's shoulders.

Phil writhed at one and the same time under Ellinor's scorn and the allusion to Edie.

"You don't see, you don't understand," he began hesitatingly. Then he jumped to his feet, and began a hurried, nervous walk up and down the long room.

"Yes, I do see—I do understand," answered Ellinor calmly, remaining where she was on the sofa. "You have met somewhere, as I said just now, my little country cousin, and your eyes for the moment are full of her. Very well, so much the better. Compare us one with the other, in leisurely, impartial fashion; look well at me—you have evidently quite enough of little Edie in your eyes—and decide upon which of us you will bestow your golden apple."

She leaned back, placidly folding her hands on her lap. Royally beautiful she looked, seated there on her dark crimson satin sofa. She had on a dress of a deep, rich amber shade. A blood-red rose, fastened at her throat with a big topaz, was her only ornament. A dazzling May sunshine came flooding the room through a window immediately opposite; it lighted up every delicate carnation tint in the exquisitely transparent complexion, burnished the crown of russet-brown hair, added a glow and a brilliancy to the large, full-pupilled eyes.

As she sat thus enthroned, a very queen of beauty, somehow even the tables and chairs about her seemed to grow commonplace and insignificant accessories to the

stately picture. A Holbein or a Titian might have given her a worthy background. None other.

And Phil all obediently stood there, looking, and looking at her, and, not being compounded of either marble or ice, it is not to be wondered at if every one of his senses was dazzled and bewildered, and his last shred of common-sense annihilated.

Ellinor let him look a second or two, then a shade of sadness swept over her face.

"After all," she said sweetly, looking up at him, "it is not worth while taking very long over your decision; it will be for such a short time. See, here are the invitations for my first and last ball. Gretchen has written them every one. Hasn't she a neat, clear hand?"

Phil somehow stumbled across the room and knelt at her very feet.

With one hand he swept away the pile of neatly-written notes; with the other he encircled her waist, drawing her close, closer to him, as though he felt that every passing moment, even, were drawing her out of his clasp.

"Ellinor," he said passionately, brokenly, "for the love of Heaven, do not torture me in this way! I do not believe one word of what those wretched doctors have said. No one, I vow, shall separate us, come what may. I will not give you up—I swear it! I will marry you—I vow before Heaven I will, let who may say nay. I will go with you wherever you may go; I will die with you if you must die. A man's life, at any rate, is in his own keeping, to do as he pleases with."

Ellinor released herself from his clasp, and rose from her sofa. Once more her lip curled, and her eyes flashed scorn.

"I can understand now what is the meaning of the proverb, 'Show me a man's friends, and I'll tell you what he is like.' I never before detected in you the slightest resemblance to Rodney Thorne."

Phil rose hastily to his feet.

"Why—why?" he stammered. "What have I done to make myself like poor Rodney?"

"You knelt at my feet just now with much such a puny wail or threat as he used to indulge in from time to time—about your life being in your own hands, and that sort of thing. But worse than that—like him, you have broken faith with me."

"Broken faith with you!"

"Yes, broken faith with me. Did not Rodney swear to me he would go quietly home and marry Lucy Selwyn, and did you

not vow to me when I suffered myself to be engaged to you that no allusion to marriage or death should ever pass your lips?"

"Oh, my love, my love!" cried Phil, catching her once more in his arms, and holding her close to his heart, while he kissed hotly her lips, cheeks, hair, "in your presence a man can have only these two thoughts in his mind—love or death!"

She let him kiss her now without rebuke—nay, more, smiled up into his eyes with a look that has many a time ere this made a man "drink the cup of a costly death."

"I governed men by change, and so I swayed all moods," once an Eastern Queen seemed to sing in a poet's ear.

Ellinor, without making a song about it, had certainly attained a marvellous proficiency in the art.

CHAPTER XLVI.

WHY Miss Yorke sent out the invitations to her ball a good fortnight or three weeks sooner than she had originally intended requires explanation.

On the morning of the day that Phil had encountered Edie on the stairs of his uncle's hotel, Ellinor had received a letter from her mother informing her of a sudden change for the worse in Juliet's health, and of the doctor's orders that they should immediately quit Mentone—now becoming too warm for the invalid—and undertake a long sea voyage, if possible to Australia or New Zealand.

"By the time this reaches you," wrote the hapless mother, "we shall have set sail for Sydney, New South Wales. I will write to you as often as possible by any passing steamer, but, ah me! I greatly fear my next letter may be a black-bordered one."

Ellinor sat for nearly half an hour in her dressing-room with this letter lying on her lap, lost in deep, concentrated thought.

Then she rang the bell.

"You know my mother's writing, Gretchen," she asked, when the maid made her appearance.

Gretchen assured her mistress that she did.

"Very well," Ellinor went on, "for the future no letter from her is to be given to me. You always bring my letters to me; stop those from my mother, even if one comes with a black-edged envelope, put them into one of my empty jewel-cases, and keep the key yourself—you understand?"

"Yes, madame."

"And there is something else. I will give my ball a fortnight or so earlier than

I at first intended, so it will be better for you to write the invitations this morning."

"Yes, madame."

"And, by the way, Mr. Effingham will not design my dress for me this time. Artists do tea-gowns well enough—anything, in fact, where the lines are strictly prescribed for them, but over a ball-dress they grow eccentric at times. So let me have the design from Madame Blanche in good time. I want to think well over this dress of mine."

But it may be questioned whether Harry Effingham would have been willing to devote his energies to the designing of a ball-dress for Miss Yorke, even if the momentous undertaking had been entrusted to his skill. For the simple reason that he had just then made for himself another outlet for his eccentricity by eloping with and marrying a barmaid.

Driven to desperation by Ellinor's sudden and complete severance of their former friendly intercourse, he had adopted this by no means original channel for his disappointed love.

This news in due course reached Ellinor's ears. It called forth a contemptuous smile from the beauty and a "Thank Heaven, we've heard the last of him now!" Nothing more.

What more, indeed, could be expected of her? She had already decided him to be incompetent to design her ball-dress; of tea-gowns she had an ample supply, more than enough to last her till—well, say till the "end of the season." Her portrait, superbly painted, hung in the Academy, and in the Grosvenor Gallery also. Of what further use could R.As. of any degree be to her now?

At least so she said to Uncle Hugh frankly enough by way of dismissing the subject, when the old gentleman a little sarcastically commented on the folly of this artist friend of hers.

Uncle Hugh stared at her a moment, scarcely catching her full meaning.

"I always told you so, Nell, when you were so bent on giving sittings to the young fools, and having your portrait stuck about here, there, and everywhere——" he began.

But Ellinor cut him short with a question.

"Uncle Hugh," she queried, abruptly, and a little sharply, "what about my yacht? Have you found one likely to suit me?"

A change swept over Uncle Hugh's face. He had just come in from a nice little

dinner at his club, eaten with some congenial bachelor friends, after which he had been fortunate enough to retrieve certain previous losses at baccarat and napoleon. Skulls and cross-bones were to close his feast, it seemed, and obscure the pleasant little impressions of joviality he had brought away with him.

He answered gravely enough:

"Yes, I've purchased through my agent a magnificent schooner, built for the Grand Duke Albert Saxe Marienbad, but not required by him for the simple reason that he can't afford to pay for her now she's finished."

"Thank you, Uncle Hugh. What about the decorations? There's only one man who could carry out exactly what I want done."

"That man shall be employed, Nell," said Uncle Hugh a little huskily, and going backwards a step towards the door as he spoke, anxious to beat a retreat before a subject that always set him shivering; "but you had better come down one morning with me to Greenhithe, and have a look at her. She has splendid accommodation, and is a magnificent sailer—has a tremendous spread of canvas. The Kestrel, or Penguin, or Lapwing, or some other wing she's called."

"The name must be altered," said Ellinor with decision. "She might as well be called the Mary Ann or the Water-Lily at once. I should say there were at least a dozen or two of Kestrels, Penguins, or Lapwings afloat at the present moment."

"Well, my dear, call her what you please," said Uncle Hugh, retreating still nearer to the door, and farther from the grim, repellent subject; "only let me know when you've made up your mind what she's to be christened."

"I'll think about it," said Ellinor slowly. "But, Uncle Hugh, there's one thing that wants no thinking over, upon which my mind is quite made up. The yacht, whatever she's to be called, must be completed and lying off Cowes by the third week in July—will you remember, Uncle Hugh?—by the third week in July."

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